

# Iran's War on Women

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**IRAN**

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The Iranian regime continues to discriminate systematically against women, treating them as second-class citizens. Tehran enables violence against women and sexual exploitation of girls; harasses, jails, fines, and flogs women for crimes like appearing in public without covering their hair and bodies; forcibly segregates women from men; disproportionately punishes women in the judicial system; cracks down on activists for women's rights; denies women political and economic opportunities; and favors men over women in family and inheritance law.

## Violence

The Iranian regime has failed to combat the epidemic of violence against women in that country. [Domestic violence is not a crime](#) under Iranian law and criminal penalties for murder as a result of domestic violence or honor killings are [lighter](#) than the penalties for other acts of murder. For example, men convicted of murdering their daughters are imprisoned for only three to 10 years, instead of receiving the standard sentence of capital punishment. Domestic violence is generally viewed as a private family matter.

The Iranian parliament still has yet to enact draft legislation authored over nine years ago that would criminalize gender-based violence. After the bill languished in parliament for over five years, the Rouhani administration approved it in May 2017 and sent it to the judiciary for review, but Iran's chief justice then [sat on the bill](#) for two more years.

Finally, in September 2019, the judiciary cleared the legislation after [heavily amending and weakening](#) it. The revised bill was criticized by the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) because it "does not provide effective and sufficient guarantees to protect women against violence and, in many cases, promotes and supports stereotypical, discriminatory, and sexist views toward women." The CHRI notes that among other problems, the measure:

- does not clearly define the term "violence" and does not use the term "domestic violence";
- does not remove legal and enforcement obstacles to protect women from and prosecute their abusers;
- only requires abusive husbands to provide financial support for their wives for three months after they separate, thereby encouraging battered women to return to their abusive spouses;
- requires women who seek justice in the courts after being battered or sexually abused by their husbands or fathers to go through a one-month required period of reconciliation with their abusers, during which time the case is referred to a dispute-resolution body; and
- prevents an abused woman from getting a divorce on the grounds of abuse until her husband is convicted three times of engaging in violence against her.

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After more than one year of further delay, the cabinet approved a further-revised bill on January 3. [According to Human Rights Watch](#), “While a step forward in providing legal definitions surrounding violence against women and measures to support victims, the bill lacks provisions for criminalizing marital rape and child marriage.” The bill awaits further action by the parliament.

Iranian law de facto deters most rape victims from reporting their assault. Rape victims who come forward can face prosecution for crimes such as adultery (punishable by execution), “indecent,” or “immoral behavior.” Accused rapists can only be convicted upon the testimony of multiple witnesses (four Muslim men or a greater number of a combination of male and female witnesses). [Marital rape is legal](#).

Zahra Navidpour, a woman who had [accused](#) Salman Khodadadi, who chaired the parliament’s Social Affairs Committee and was a former IRGC commander, of rape, was found dead in her home under mysterious circumstances in January of 2019. Also, in 2019, former Iranian vice president and Tehran major Mohammad Ali Najafi confessed to and was [convicted](#) of murdering one of his wives, but her family waived the application of the death penalty.

In June 2018, international media reported on [protests](#) surrounding the gang rape of at least 41 women and girls in the city of Iranshahr, a predominantly Baluchi province. The regime allegedly sought to deny the cases, in which some of the perpetrators reportedly had ties to Iranian security forces. Online activists who sought to publicize the situation on social media faced harassment and arrest for their activities.

In 2020, 14-year-old Romina Ashrafi was [beheaded by her father](#) for running off with her 29-year-old boyfriend. Fathers who kill their children are subject to a maximum of 10 years in prison, while mothers who commit such crimes are subject to the death penalty. Due to national outrage about the beheading, Iran’s Guardian Council okayed a law that emotional or physical child abuse or abandonment but [did not modify](#) the 10-year maximum sentence. In August 2020, Romina Ashrafi’s father was [sentenced to nine years’ imprisonment](#).

## **Sexual Exploitation of Girls**

Under Iranian law, girls may be legally married at [13 years old](#) (compared with 15 for boys), or even younger if their respective fathers or grandfathers agree and a judge assents. Regime figures [reveal](#) over 40,000 registered marriages of children in Iran—including over 300 girls under age 14—and the United Nations has [expressed concern](#) about the increasing number of marriages of girls 10 or younger.

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In recent years, there have been [efforts](#) by women lawmakers to raise the age of marriage, but they have languished in parliament, despite endorsement by some leading clerics like Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi.

## **Forced Covering**

Women who fail to wear headscarves and other attire covering their bodies in public may be harassed by the morality police, detained, or fined, and/or flogged. Many Iranians have expressed opposition to this policy, including through the [“White Wednesdays”](#) campaign (begun in 2017), in which Iranians wear white headscarves or other clothing on Wednesdays in protest.

In December 2017, Tehran’s police chief, Gen. Hossein Rahimi, [announced](#) that officers would cease arresting and charging women for dress code violations. However, the authorities reversed their policy after the nationwide protests against the regime in late December and early January. During the demonstrations, Iranian women publicly removed their headscarves and waved them in the air. Videos of these acts of defiance by women dubbed “The Girls of Revolution Street” [went viral](#) worldwide.

In response, Gen. Rahimi [announced](#) a zero-tolerance policy against the protestors, warning that “Although the sentence for not wearing a hijab [head-covering] is two months in prison, anyone encouraging others to take off their hijab will be jailed for 10 years.” The latter punishment would be applied via trying protesters for the crimes of [“inciting corruption and prostitution”](#) under article 639 of the [Islamic Penal Code](#). As noted below, since 2018, the regime has arrested at least 44 women protesting mandatory head-covering.

## **Disproportionate Judicial Punishment**

Under the Iranian penal code, the age of criminal responsibility for women is just [nine lunar years](#), compared with 15 lunar years for men. Women receive harsher punishments than men for several crimes, including adultery (which is liable to the death penalty). Most sentences of death by stoning for adultery are leveled against women. Iranian family law also [increases women’s exposure](#) to prosecution for adultery. Men are allowed to have up to four wives and an unlimited number of “temporary wives,” while a woman is limited to one husband, and divorces are far easier to obtain for men than for women. Husbands need not cite a reason for divorce, while wives are only entitled to divorces if their husbands sign contracts to that effect; cannot provide for their families, have otherwise violated their marriage contracts; or are impotent, insane, or addicted to drugs.

## Crackdown on Women's Rights Activists

Iranian authorities continue to harass, interrogate, detain, and imprison women's rights activists, sometimes accusing them of national-security crimes like espionage and collaboration with foreign powers to overthrow the regime. The government prohibits some women's rights activists from traveling abroad.

Since 2018, the regime detained dozens of individuals for protesting mandatory head-covering. The activists have faced charges that include "inciting prostitution and corruption." One of the activists, [Shaparak Shajarizadeh](#), was sentenced to two years in prison and an 18-year suspended sentence after prolonged detention in which she was reportedly tortured and beaten and put in solitary confinement. Shajarizadeh, who fled Iran after her sentencing, claims she was told that she would serve her entire 20-year sentence if she engaged in further activism. In August 2019, a revolutionary court sentenced another hijab-protester, [Saba Kordafshari](#), to 24 years' imprisonment.

In June 2018, the regime arrested prominent human rights lawyer [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#), who had represented Shajarizadeh, reportedly telling her that she had been sentenced in absentia to a five-year prison sentence for espionage and endangering Iranian national security. Critics of the Iranian regime allege that the charges were a pretext and that Iran's government targeted her for representing political prisoners and women protesting Iran's compulsory hijab law.

In March 2019, Sotoudeh's husband, Reza Khandan, [announced](#) that the regime had opaquely reached additional verdicts against her and that her complete sentence was "a total of 38 years imprisonment with 148 lashes, five years in jail for the first case and 33 years in prison with 148 lashes on the second charges." Sotoudeh was previously imprisoned from 2010 to 2013 for purported crimes against national security and Iran's political system. Khandan himself was [sentenced](#) in January 2019 to six years' imprisonment for "conspiring against national security" and "propaganda against the system" through his public advocacy for his wife. As of March 2020, Khandan remained free while he appealed his sentence.

In April 2019, the authorities [arrested](#) Yasaman Aryani, her mother Monireh Arabshahi, and Mojgan Keshavarz after they posted a video for International Women's Day showing them walking without headscarves in the subway system. In August, a revolutionary court sentenced the three to 16, 16, and 23 years in prison, respectively, for "spreading propaganda against the system" and "inciting corruption and prostitution." An appeals court [reaffirmed their sentences](#) in February 2020.

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In September 2019, the regime [arrested](#) three relatives of Masih Alinejad, who founded the movement to protest mandatory head-covering. Some of them were put in solitary confinement, according to reports. The authorities reportedly later released one of the three relatives after interrogating him and warned him that contact with Alinejad or “her team” was a crime. In March 2019, the regime interrogated Alinejad’s elderly mother for two hours and videotaped the session.

In June 2019, Alinejad posted to social media a video of plainclothes police dragging away a 15-year-old girl for refusing an order to cover her head. Police later confirmed the arrest.

The authorities have [cracked down](#) on activists protesting “acid attacks,” in which acid is thrown on women who purportedly engaged in “immoral” behavior. One such activist, Alieh Motalebzadeh was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment on October 11, 2020, for “conspiracy against state security” through her advocacy. The regime also [arrested and prosecuted](#) Negar Masoudi, a photographer and documentary filmmaker, for holding an exhibition of photos of acid attack victims and [urging](#) that the purchase and sale of acid be prohibited. She was tried for “propaganda against the regime” and “conspiring against national security.”

## **Compulsory Gender Segregation**

Iranian law requires women and men to sit in separate areas in [public transportation](#), at [public weddings](#), and in [university classes](#); to attend [separate schools](#) (even preschools); and to use [separate entrances](#) to some airports, universities, and public buildings. Women generally may not attend men’s sporting events, such as soccer matches, in public stadiums.

## **Restricted Political and Cultural Opportunities**

In practice, women are not allowed to serve in the uppermost ranks of Iran’s leadership, including as supreme leader or as members of the Iranian Guardian Council. The Council continues to [disqualify](#) women who register as presidential candidates, including [all 40](#) who sought to run in the 2021 elections. Women are also [prohibited](#) from serving as judges. [No women](#) have served in the cabinet of purportedly moderate President Hassan Rouhani. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, only one woman has served as a cabinet minister. Two of Iran’s 12 vice presidents, who are less powerful than cabinet ministers, are women. Only [17 women](#) serve in Iran’s 290-member parliament, and the Guardian Council disqualifies thousands of prospective candidates from running in legislative elections.

The government frequently censors publications critical of the Islamic Republic and removes material regarding women’s rights. The regime also censors or bans movies that it believes would spread subversive ideas about the rights of women.

## Restricted Economic Opportunities

Iran is ranked seventh-worst in the world for gender equality, including equal participation in the economy, in the World Economic Forum's 2021 [Global Gender Gap report](#).

The Iranian regime [bars](#) women from working in some government departments, including the Judiciary Organisation of Military Forces. Iranian law gives husbands control over their wives' ability to work. In some cases, husbands are legally allowed to block their wives from employment, and some employers will not hire women without their husbands' consent. Men may also prevent their wives from traveling abroad. Women often must not travel without a male guardian or chaperone and risk being harassed if they travel alone.

Consequently, the percentage of women that constitute the Iranian workforce has languished in the mid-teens for years, while the [unemployment rate](#) for women—around 20 percent—is about double that for men.

Iranian law provides insufficient protection for women against workplace sexual harassment. The law also does not bar discrimination in hiring on the basis of sex.

The regime also [restricts](#) women from pursuing [almost 80 majors](#), ranging from engineering, computer science, and nuclear physics to business and English literature.

## Unequal Treatment in Family and Inheritance Law

Iranian family and inheritance laws generally favor men over women.

As noted above, men may have up to four wives—and enter into an unlimited number of “temporary marriages”—while women are only allowed one husband. A female virgin of any age requires her male guardian's permission to marry. Men may divorce their wives for any reason or none at all, while women only have the right to divorce under certain conditions.

In divorce cases, Iranian law generally grants custody of children seven and older to their fathers, while women are usually granted custody of children until the latter turns seven.

Women require their husbands' permission to obtain a passport and travel abroad. Husbands are legally allowed to determine where the family lives and to prevent their wives from engaging in certain vocations.

In October 2019, Iran's Guardian Council signed off on a law that would grant Iranian citizenship to the children of Iranian women married to non-citizen husbands. Previously, only male Iranians were entitled to pass their citizenship to their children. Because of this previous



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restriction, some 400,000 to one million children of Iranian women are not Iranian citizens, according to reports.

However, even under the new law, citizenship for children born of Iranian women and foreign husbands is not automatically given—women must apply for citizenship for their children, or the children may themselves apply after turning 18. Applicants must be screened for “security problems” and cleared by the intelligence ministry and the intelligence branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, meaning that children of parents viewed as critical of the regime could be denied citizenship.

By law, upon the death of a man without children, his wife is [entitled](#) to inherit only one-quarter of his estate. If he has children, the wife’s share is reduced to a mere eighth. If a man had multiple wives, this inheritance is divided equally among them. Sons are entitled to inherit twice as much as daughters.

Similarly, while a man is legally entitled to inherit all forms of property in the event of his wife’s death, a widow only has the right to inherit a portion of the value of her husband’s land—not the land itself. Consequently, other inheritors may pay the widow her share of the land’s value and then evict her from the property.

*Sources (unless otherwise noted):* U.S. Department of State, United Nations, Freedom House, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch.